1/30/72 - Control
LUM

Being the Church in the Valley
Exodus 24:15 - 25:9

New intro for Urban Min. - a dream Fulfilled

Coming Down From the Mountain
September 12, 1971
Luke 9:28-37

Summer is over. Last week's weather notwithstanding, the season of summer has come to an end and fall is upon us. For many, if not all of us, it has been a time for diversion, rest, leisure; many of us took vacations: some of us had experiences this summer we shall long remember; thrilling experiences. And even if we did nothing out of the ordinary ourselves, we were affected by the vacation mentality of our culture. Life was significantly different two weeks ago than it is this week. Now the pace quickens, children return to school, organizations resume meeting, calendars fill with engagements; from the halls of government in Washington all the way down to the elementary school P.T.A., American life is cranking up to begin in earnest once again. It might be described as coming down from the mountain.

One of our needs as individuals is for those experiences that provide diversion and respite from the normal round. We need to get away from it all: to forget about the press of professional, social and parental responsibilities. We need, occasionally, to flush out our systems, and breathe the pure, undefiled, quiet air of a vacation week-end. We are better people for it. We function better in all our different roles if we take time to step away for a period and let our bodies, minds and spirits rejuvenate themselves. But sometimes, and I think all of us know a little bit about this part, we have a little difficulty making the necessary adjustment to normality. Falling back into the usual pattern is not as enjoyable as falling out of it. Coming down off the mountain is difficult. It's quite a bit like the NASA moon missions. Houston Space Center officials always point out that re-entry is the vital stage of every mission: that the euphoria of moon exploration is fun, but the real technological skill of everyone involved is put to the most strenuous test in the effort to bring the astronauts back home safely. Anyone who has returned from a great vacation experience well knows the

difficulty of the re-entry process.

Of course, we have the option of trying to stay on the mountain. We can, if we choose, live from vacation to vacation, or more to the point, from week-end to week-end, putting little stock in what transpires in between. We can, if we choose, try to live a kind of life that refuses to descend into the valley, or for that matter, refuses to acknowledge that there is a valley. I sense that this particular life style is a kind of model for a growing number of Americans. And I can think of no better example than Playboy Magazine and the particular philosophy from which it emerges. Now this gets a little sticky because I believe that magazine does render a service to the mind set of middle America. It has helped to teach that pleasure is not bad; that to be self-conscious about one's sexuality is to be normal. It has helped to rid our culture of some taboos that we needed to be rid of. But there are no children in Playboy, and no alcoholics, and no junkies, and no ghettoes, and no broken lives which result from sexual promiscuity; no guilt, no unemployment, nothing, in fact, that alludes to the reality of life in the valley. It's all on the mountain - the mountain top of good music, food, clothes, cars, booze and beautiful women. I think that's a model for many people, even if they're achieving it only in the private world of fantasy. It's a model of life lived on the mountain top, in which no one ever has to come down. And it's shallow and superficial and naive and totally impossible. For the valley - at the foot of the mountain - is where life is really lived.

Our New Testament Lesson this ~~morning~~ evening is about this business of coming down from the mountain. Let's take a careful look. The account is included in all three Synoptic Gospels - ~~Matthew, Mark and Luke~~, with very little variation. It is known as the Transfiguration, and New Testament Scholars agree that it is one of those important, pivotal events in the Gospel narrative. It is pivotal because it marks the transformation of the disciples' relationship with Jesus.

What happened exactly? We don't know, and it's good to acknowledge that we don't, and furthermore it's probably futile and irrelevant to attempt to restructure the experience. I choose to interpret in this manner. The disciples had been with Jesus for some time - probably several months. They had come to know him as teacher, healer, prophet. The inner circle, Peter, James and John, probably knew him best, and were more deeply involved with him than the others. So it was those three that he invited to accompany him to the mountains, for a brief vacation, if you will. Matthew notes that they were there for six days. During that time their relationship with him turned a corner. They came to see him in an altogether different light. They went up into the mountains with their friend Jesus, teacher, healer, prophet. While on the mountain they were led to see him as Savior, Lord, Son of God. ~~Miraculous? Of course. It's always a miracle when, by the grace of God, we are given to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.~~ The testimony of the Church down through the ages has always been that men, on their own, do not will faith in Christ. Rather men are enabled to have faith, given faith, by the very Spirit of God prodding, pushing, disturbing them. So it was that Jesus was transfigured: changed: altered. They saw him in a new light. Their relationship with him was different: and in a real sense they were now different.

The Gospel account is full of rich Old Testament Symbolism. It helps to understand that, too. Moses took the Elders of Israel up on a mountain, and after six days a cloud descended and God spoke to Moses out of the cloud. Elijah - the prophet of God exemplary, Moses - the servant leader of God's people. It all ties together. The New Testament writers are here saying something about the continuing redemptive activity of God which began long ago in the time of the Exodus, and which now comes to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Well, Peter, the impetuous one, the first to speak always, wanted to prolong that experience. Something great had happened, and it felt very natural to suggest that they do something to give it permanent structure: at least a reminder that on this spot we - Peter, James and John saw Jesus as God's only Son.

So he said, "Master, it is good that we are here. Shall we build three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah?" The shelters - or booths - didn't get built. But it's interesting to recall that this too is a very rich Old Testament image. When God addressed Moses out of the cloud on the mountain, he told Moses to build a sanctuary, a tent for him to reside among his people. That's what the tabernacle was, a portable sanctuary, partly wood, partly cloth , which was erected, taken apart by the Levites and reassembled at each new campsite during the long years the people wandered through the wilderness. So Peter wasn't just talking off the top of his head: there was historic precedent for what he was suggesting.

But what Peter missed was the key to the whole tabernacle idea in the first place. Moses didn't build the tent on the mountain. He built it in the valley - where the people were. He built it for portability - it could be picked up and carried with the people. In that tabernacle was housed the Ark of the Covenant, and on it the mercy seat - the locus of God's presence among the people. The mercy seat always pointed forward - God was understood to be looking ahead, always with his people but at the same time out in front of them. The "tabernacling presence" of God is a turning point in Old Testament thinking: one which develops in the Bible into incarnational theology, i.e. a God who in-dwells: who lives in and among his people. And the whole point is that you don't pin God down to a certain spot and place - either in the heavens or in a wooden temple, because his presence moves with his people down in the valley.

Peter suggested three permanent structures to prolong the experience on

the mountain top. While there is precedent, he had missed the point, and the Gospel writer apologizes for him with the remark: "He spoke without knowing what he was saying."

The outcome of the transfiguration is that they came down and significantly there was a crowd waiting for them. Peter would have stayed, but Jesus led him back down, and waded right into the realistic business of clamoring, hungry, dirty people, among them an epileptic boy whom he healed.

The Word of God to us in all of this is, I believe, quite clear. Real life is in the valley. Real life needs to be lived in the valley. We need those occasional trips to the mountain, but we will be measured by our willingness to appropriate what happens up there for the sake of living effectively down here.

And what is true about life in general is particularly relevant in regard to specifically Christian life. As I read this text, the Christian life is a combination of going to the mountain top, incorporating that experience and then walking courageously back into the valley. In what was probably his greatest speech, the late Martin Luther King told the hundreds of thousands of people at the Washington Monument that he had been to the mountain , and had seen there a vision of a new America crowned with brotherhood and equality and justice for all ofGod's children. This country needs those soaring visions. But the greater need is for men like Dr, King who see the vision and then walk into the valley of garbage collectors and welfare recipients and urban politics. We need both - the glory of the mountain - and the dirt and foul air in the valley.

The trouble is that we, like Peter, prefer it on the mountain top. The Church of Jesus Christ, in a very real sense, has done in our age what Peter could not accomplish. It has built booths, shelters, monuments to one glorious moment in time. Shelters that have become stained glass mausoleums, empty

cathedral museums that speak of a wonderful day that is no more.

We are learning, painfully, the error of our ways. We are learning as a Church, that Jesus Christ calls us to follow him, and that to follow him we must be portable, flexible, movable. - to new narrative #1 Let me tell you about an example that is relevant because it involves us and our money. On the corner of 16th and Delaware in Indianapolis stands the First Presbyterian Church, a great old church with a long and glorious history. The sanctuary is huge, well appointed, red carpet and houses the most expensive stained glass window in the city as well as a $100,000 pipe organ. Beside the Church stands a community center and educational building, constructed for the children of the white doctors and lawyers and professional people who used to live in the neighborhood. But there is no congregation. From past strength the congregation dwindled over the years to a fraction of its size. Recently, its predominantly white, middle class constituency merged with a suburban Presbyterian Church. Now, when this sort of thing happens, and it is happening in every urban area in the nation, the denomination usually abandons the cite, tears down the facility or sells off to the highest bidder. However, this time, the Presbyterian Church - Synod of Indiana and Presbytery of Indianapolis - is not backing off. Rather we are attempting to stay in that particular valley. The building is now called the Presbyterian Metropolitan Center, and it is one of the most exciting projects I've seen. You and I are helping to pay for it. It currently houses day care centers, block clubs, youth organizations, drug rehabilitation centers: plans include the formation of an experimental worshipping community, and many other people-oriented programs. That's what it means to come down off the mountain. We're hoping to do something of the same thing here with the Lafayette Urban Ministry. But the point is that every congregation must, if it is to live by the power that God alone gives, learn what it means to come down from its particular mountain and walk in its

particular valley.

What is true about life generally is specifically true for the Church, and abundantly true for individuals. I guess there is no one here who doesn't wish, deep in his heart of hearts, for some clear, concise experience of the reality of Jesus Christ. As a corollary to that I would expect that many feel a little guilty, perhaps, and more than a little inadequate, when confronted by a zealous evangelical who appears to be on the mountain top all the time. And, I think, we find ourselves in this dilemma because we've been sold a theological bill of goods. Too frequently we've been told that our need is to know Jesus Christ as our personal savior, period. Too frequently, evangelism and a lot of it is coming right out of the bosom ofPresbyterianism - is described as the mountain top experience of knowing and feeling that Christ is my Lord, He died for me, He is my Savior and Pilot and Guide, period. It's wrong - dead wrong - that preponderance of "me's" and I's". Jesus Christ is a personal savior - but to accept him as such is to be led by him. It is not to ~~presume~~ preserve that personal experience as the prototype by building a shelter to mark the spot. It is to follow him: to go where he leads and do what he wills.

Jesus came down from the mountain and bids us follow. Let us not forget that Peter, James and John were invited up onto the mountain as a result of their following. Their experience of discipleship did not begin on the mountain top - it did not end on the mountain top. Rather Jesus invited them to that good and great experience as an interlude to the hard work of following.

So, I believe it shall be for you and me and any who would be his disciple. We will be invited to the mountain one day. Those rich experiences of faith will come to us in God's good time. In the meantime there is work to be done in the valley - where his people- including you and me - live and move and have being. Down in the valley where we live

our lives - and where Jesus Christ precedes us, bidding us to follow.

Amen.

Our Father, we are grateful for those moments in our lives when we are given to see clearly: those rare experiences of truth and light and clarity. But grant us, O God, courage to incorporate those into the real job of following. Grant us to come down from our mountain, in the steps of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.